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The Relationship between Schools and Religion in the Czech Lands One Hundred Years Ago

Jaroslav Vaculík / e-mail: vaculik@ped.muni.cz

Department of History, Faculty of Education, Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic

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The position of religion in Czech schools has been the subject of discussion among educationalists since the second half of the nineteenth century. Supporters of the radical current excluded religion from school completely, while conservatives defended the existing situation just as determinedly. Advocates of the reform tendency took the view that religion, as an essential component of modern culture, cannot and must not be ignored in school and that schools must not cut themselves off from centuries-old traditions.

Key words: *schools; religion; Czech Lands; One Hundred Years Ago*

The position of religion in Czech schools has been the subject of discussion among educationalists since the second half of the nineteenth century. These discussions took place primarily on the pages of the bulletin *Pedagogické rozhledy* (Educational Outlooks) which was published from 1888 onwards. The significant monographs on this topic published in book form include the work by Emanuel Havelka on independent non-denominational schools entitled *Volná škola* (The Independent School) and, most importantly, the work by the author of *Dějiny pedagogiky* (The History of Pedagogy) Otakar Kádner entitled *Náboženství a škola* (Religion and Schools).¹

¹ Kádner, O. (1918). *Náboženství a škola*. Praha: Dědictví Komenského.

Ladislav Horák also published the essay *The Religion of the Non-denominational School*² on this topic in the journal "Budoucnost" ("The Future") in which he stated that "religion, in spite of all its downsides, was and remains essentially the only educational subject in school, the only subject that fulfils the task of moral education. The whole of our present school system today consists of religion."³

Kádner stated that, until the time of the Reformation, religion was not a separate teaching subject, since the entire educational system was inspired by the spirit of Christianity. He noted that, from the beginning, Protestants emphasised the need for separate religious instruction and interpretation of the Scripture. Religious instruction was introduced at once as a separate subject, for which textbooks (catechisms) were produced, in Evangelical schools. The Catholic Church only followed the example set by the Protestants thanks to the Jesuits and tried to match their influence. This was also the starting point for the development of the didactics of religion as a teaching subject.

According to Kádner, the religious question emerged from the general democratisation and industrialisation at the beginning of the twentieth century. He stated that, "we live not at a time of deep religious conviction, but on the contrary at a time when religion itself finds itself in a grave defensive battle".⁴

The question arose as to whether the school should be based fully on denominational foundations or be non-denominational. In Germany, there was a strong tendency among teachers towards denominational schools, and religion was their foremost priority. The number of lessons in religious instruction in the individual German Lands ranged from two to five lessons a week at primary schools and from two to three at secondary schools. In contrast, the French school system was completely secular, and morality was taught instead of religion. In Switzerland, conditions were different in each canton; no one was forced to attend religious classes and morality was introduced in a number of cantons. A fierce battle raged in Belgium between public inter-denominational education and private denominational education. Religion was taught for half an hour a day at public schools, though children could be excused from it at the wishes of their parents. Religion was not introduced at public schools in Holland, though religion was, however, compulsory at denominational schools. Children could be excused from religion in Luxemburg at the wishes of

² Horák, L. (1918). *Náboženství školy bezkonfesní*. *Budoucnost*, vol. 1, pp. 5–8.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁴ Kádner, O. *Op. cit.*, p. 8.

their parents. Religion was taught for seven and a half hours a week in Norway, and similarly for five hours in Sweden. In England, religion was introduced as a special subject only in ecclesiastical schools. In Spain, children of other faiths were exempted from Catholic religion in 1913. In Portugal, religion was removed from schools and left to the responsibility of parishes (though under the supervision of the state), following the declaration of the Republic. Local authorities were responsible for religious teaching from 1908 onwards in Italy, where religion could be replaced with the teaching of morality and civics. The teaching of religion in schools was conducted throughout the Balkans, while teaching of the Quran was the only subject in ecclesiastical schools in Turkey. In Czarist Russia, secular schools which taught religion and church singing competed with fully denominational parish schools. The education system was completely secular in the USA, where religion was a private matter. The situation was similar in Japan where morality was taught instead of religion. Religion was taught separately according to individual denominations in Hungary and Croatia. Inter-denominational schooling was introduced in Austria, although Catholicism was considered the favoured religion. Two hours a week were devoted to religious instruction at primary and secondary schools.⁵

In the Czech Lands, an assembly of five hundred teachers from Prague demanded the separation of the school system from the church and the teaching of morals in as early as 1848. The Social Democrats and Professor of Philosophy and Psychology František Krejčí called for the complete removal of religion from schools. Professor of Philosophy Tomáš Masaryk first wanted religion not be removed from schools, though he later left it to the family as a private matter. Pedagogue Otakar Chlup wanted the teaching of religion to be deferred until such time as the child was able to understand the meaning of religious ideas.⁶ The philosopher and sociologist Emanuel Chalupný also proposed deferring the teaching of religion until the age of fourteen.⁷ Professor of Philosophy and Pedagogy František Drtina was in favour of the laicisation of the school system, while pedagogue Eduard Štorch was in favour of revising religious textbooks in accordance with pedagogical principles.⁸

Supporters of the radical current excluded religion from school completely, while conservatives defended the existing situation just as

⁵ Ibid, pp. 10–12.

⁶ Chlup, O. (1911). O výchově citů. *Pedagogické rozhledy*, vol. 23, p. 793.

⁷ Chalupný, E. *Přehled*, vol. 8, p. 257.

⁸ *Volná škola*, vol. 4, p. 110.

determinedly. Advocates of the reform tendency took the view that religion, as an essential component of modern culture, cannot and must not be ignored in school and that schools must not cut themselves off from centuries-old traditions.

The pedagogue Kádner rejected the teaching of morality as a substitute for religion on the basis of experiences from France. He stated that, "moral instruction does not consist of making children believe in certain information, nor in arousing praiseworthy sentiments in them, but rather involves moral dispositions and habits, and these are not cultivated and developed by words and theories, but by deeds and experience".⁹

Kádner came to the conclusion that the family and the church should be the place of religious instruction, and that "denominational religion should be excluded from the teaching subjects at all levels of the school system, as it is incompatible with the secular or interdenominational nature of the modern school and as the influence of the priests in school institutions is in direct contradiction of the demand for free and independent schools."¹⁰ Priests would be able to provide religious instruction outside the scope of school teaching, though under the supervision of the state which would approve all textbooks and teaching aids used. He admitted the possibility of exceptions in the "backward parts" of Moravia and Silesia.

Criticism of the state of religious instruction came not only from liberal circles among the Czech intelligentsia, but also from Catholics. Jan Doležel, in his book *Český kněz* (The Czech Priest) dedicated to Canon of the Olomouc metropolitan chapter and Deputy František Světlík, states that before the Great War "the state of the catechists and teachers of religion at secondary (and primary) schools displayed an unfavourable balance. They taught in the spirit of the Habsburg Catholic religion just like any other subject, awarding grades like professors."¹¹ He maintained that their teaching was old-fashioned and clerical, stating that "This corrupt conformity to the honour of the Estate and teaching bureaucracy determined their entire nature so that they, to the overwhelming majority, displayed themselves as nothing other than priests fighting for the church even outside their catechetical office."¹² He reproached the catechists for

⁹ Kádner, O. Op. cit., p. 21.

¹⁰ Idem, p. 23.

¹¹ Doležel, J. (1931). *Český kněz*. Praha, p. 31.

¹² Ibidem.

not speaking to the souls of their pupils, but merely performing the duties of their office to ensure the satisfaction of their superiors.

Since the second half of the 19th century, there was a struggle between the liberal and conservative currents of Czech politics about the status of religion in school education. While the liberals wanted to exclude religion from school, conservatives said the school could not break away from its centuries-old traditions.